



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Union School of Theology, June 2021

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the Union School of Theology (the School) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the [April 2020 annual monitoring](#) desk-based analysis.

The impact of COVID-19

2 As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the monitoring visit was conducted online and included meetings with senior management teams, teaching staff and students. The scope of the evidence considered, and the nature of the judgements and operational milestones have remained the same but with some adjustments due to the online format. A risk assessment was carried out prior to the review to identify and mitigate any potential risks.

Changes since the last QAA review/monitoring visit

3 The School continues to deliver validated awards through the Open University (OU) and a partnership agreement with the 'Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam' (VU) (formally known as the Free University of Amsterdam) for delivery of its PhD programmes. In March 2020, a Flexible Distributed Learning variant of the BA programme was approved by the OU.

4 There are currently five students in 'teach-out' with the University of Chester across the taught programmes, and one PhD student is also registered with the University. 144 students are registered with the OU on the BA, Graduate Diploma and MTh programmes. Six PhD students are registered with VU and a further nine students are registered on non-accredited programmes. Excluding those on 'teach-out' and 'non-accredited' programmes, there are 150 enrolled students on validated programmes. Overall, the student population has increased by 14% since April 2020. There are currently seven full-time and two part-time academic staff, and nine full-time administrative and support staff. Over the past year, the School staff has changed significantly with the appointment of six new permanent members. The School occupies the same premises as at the last review.

Findings from the monitoring visit

5 The School has made acceptable progress in continuing to monitor, evaluate and enhance its higher education provision since the April 2020 annual monitoring desk-based analysis. During the course of monitoring, the team scrutinised documentation provided and met the School's management, academic and support staff. It also met three current students from across its OU provision.

6 The actions identified following the April 2018 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) continue to be addressed through the School's internal monitoring processes. The School continues to develop strong relationships with church communities and Christian organisations and, as recommended, this now builds on their experience to enhance the

student experience and employability. To consolidate the area of good practice, the School developed a digital framework of support to ensure the Learning Communities - regional tutor groups that would normally meet face-to-face in the students' localities - could continue to effectively support the students during the COVID-19 pandemic (paragraph 7). Through this period, effective procedures were also implemented to ensure the programme of placement or alternative activity continued to be available to its students. Appropriate actions continue to address the three affirmations from the 2018 Higher Education Review (see below paragraphs 8, 9 and 10 for more details).

7 In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school temporarily discontinued visits to its Learning Communities. To ensure alignment with School requirements, a digital framework of support was implemented with regular video conferences between School management and Lead Mentors across the Learning Communities to monitor activities. Students in each Learning Community were supported through weekly mentor meetings and the requirement to maintain regular contact with their personal tutors, the Academic Registrar and the tutor for Wellbeing and Community. The students confirmed they were supported by the School, albeit a student stated that the MTh cohort would also benefit from the system of weekly mentor meetings as provided via the GDip Learning Communities.

8 The processes to design, develop and approve new programmes and changes in curriculum and assessments require the School to work closely with its validating partner, the OU. Annual programme and institution-level reports are submitted to the OU and cover all aspects of programme delivery and ensure the School has appropriate measures in place to enhance the student experience. Changes to assessment events are approved by the external examiners that are appointed by the OU. Student surveys are undertaken at the school and module level with the outcomes discussed at the Quality Assurance Committee which is used to developing an annual Student Survey Action Plan. The processes in place for developing and monitoring programmes are robust with the School benefitting from its partnership with the OU.

9 There continues to be a clear commitment to ensure all students are fully engaged in the life of the School. Student attendance is monitored and is high across all programmes. Student representatives attend Academic Board, the Quality Assurance Committee and other meeting forums. The Quality Assurance Committee representative prepared the School annual Student Survey Report. Fellow students elect the Student President while programme representatives volunteer to participate in other meetings. While the students confirmed they were sufficiently represented, they were not all clear as to who was their specific programme representative. The students were complimentary about the proactive stance of the incoming Student President to improving the student learning experience across all programmes.

10 The School continued to offer student placement opportunities despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each placement was risk assessed and supervisors received training prior to receiving students. Throughout this period, alternative assessments were made for those students that did not want to go on placement due to perceived risk associated with the pandemic. The alternative assessments were reviewed and approved in line with the OU and school processes.

11 The School has thorough and appropriate mechanisms in place to systematically review and enhance its programme delivery. Internally, the School evaluates module delivery and wider school provision, the latter through the annual student survey that informs the development of its Student Survey Action Plans. Externally, the School is required to submit annual programme evaluations at a programme level to the OU and these evaluations incorporate updates on previous actions in addition to a forward-looking action plan. The Institutional Evaluation submitted to the OU requires the School to report on

actions implemented as a result of feedback from external organisations such as QAA. The monitoring team consider that the internal and external monitoring processes are robust and support enhancement of the student experience.

12 The 2021 student survey highlighted some issues associated with access to library and other resources. The students confirmed that access to digital library resources had improved considerably in recent months but they found the Cloud platform hard to access and navigate. As part of its plan to improve digital systems and resources, the School is taking steps to remedy navigation issues and will improve access by introducing a single password for both library and cloud systems. The School is also reviewing its assessment policy to reduce the burden associated with current practice and this should significantly reduce assessment turnaround times. The outputs of the surveys and other points raised by the student community are discussed at the deliberative meeting forums, inclusive of the Programme Committee, Quality Assurance Committee and Academic Board.

13 The School's Quality Enhancement Policy provides a framework for underpinning the effectiveness of the learning and teaching environment. The strategy is built around core values to deliver the school's strategic priorities concerning the student learning experience. The School's commitment to enhancement is evident in its agile response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was implemented in accordance with its business continuity plan. For example, the School has invested in two 'Zoom Room' facilities that allow for live lectures to be streamed simultaneously to all student cohorts. The appointment of a Tutor for Wellbeing and Community and a Tutor for Women have underpinned the support and guidance available to its students - all of whom receive additional academic and pastoral support from their personal tutor. Support mechanisms continue to enhance the student experience and provide an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

14 Student retention has remained relatively high and stable with rates between 87% and 96% recorded between 2017-18 and 2020-21. Meaningful pass-rate data are only available for the 2017-18 cohort with 92% of the retained students achieving a successful outcome. The retention rate for the BA programme ranged from 40% to 80% between 2017-18 and 2019-20 and is significantly below rates recorded for the GDip and MTh programmes. This was attributed primarily to the small number of students enrolled on the BA programme during this period. In response, the School has since enhanced its BA provision with the introduction of a new Flexible Distributed Learning mode (BA Flex) which has subsequently proved to be an appropriate delivery method during the COVID-19 pandemic. The school is aware of the need to monitor student retention rates and to assess the impact of the new BA Flex programme.

Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

15 The School works closely with the OU and VU on all aspects of programme delivery and is continuing its collaboration with the University of Chester for the 'teach-out' of its programmes. The processes put in place by the School and its awarding bodies continue to ensure that the awards are correctly positioned against *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications*. The internal and external monitoring processes augment each other and are effective in maintaining academic standards and enhancing the student experience. External examiners provide independent feedback on the maintenance of academic standards across its provision with recent reports positively supporting programme delivery and the School's approach to enhancing the student experience.

16 The School makes sure the expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education are met in a systematic way, as evidenced by the detailed mapping of School processes against the Core and Common practices in the revised Quality Code. This

exercise mapped both the persons accountable for action and the meeting forums, within which the outputs would be communicated, challenged, validated and recorded. The School is also required to work with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to maintain its specific course designation for alternative providers.

Background to the monitoring visit

17 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

18 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Neil Lucas, Reviewer, and Mr Tony Platt, QAA Officer, on 23 June 2021.

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